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STEPHEN PHILLIPS

BY EDITH WYATT

IN *Real Conversations*, Stephen Phillips is reported as saying to Mr. William Archer:

“The English nation is suspicious of anything in which the effort is not rendered obvious by partial failure.”

The saying might apply as truthfully to that jealous American dislike of all counsels of perfection which is one of the meanest characteristics of democracy.

In this country the fame of Stephen Phillips has had a singular history—the history of a repute which may be said to have been hung for its good name. An observant American publisher once remarked that in his view prestige in letters followed somewhat indiscriminately the way of the Sun-Worshippers, from East to West. In this well-known course, the poetry of Stephen Phillips was admired in New York mainly because of its London vogue: and admired in Chicago mainly because of its metropolitan celebrity. Received here in this fashion less from an informed taste for the separate works of the poet than from a mere pastoral gregariousness, his several poetic productions were, at least so far as this observer has known them and their reputation, very widely praised for certain elements they never possessed—as, for instance, the power of creating character.

On the other hand, their extraordinary faculty in the use of fresh lyric form and rhymeless verse, passed unnoticed. The poet's most standardized and lifeless performance, *Paolo and Francesca*, has always been his best-known composition here. It is not surprising, then, that work which had never been really considered for itself should have been rapidly disparaged for us without reference to its actual quality by a London reaction apparently akin to that of the voter against the candidate ceaselessly known as the just.

“The complacency of the critics is so universal as to be

almost alarming," Edmund Gosse wrote of the English reception of *Paolo and Francesca* nineteen years ago. Undoubtedly the "universality" had already begun to alarm; and shortly afterward, when *Herod* had filled the largest theatre in London for nearly three months, paragraphers, it seems, according to the counsels of Mr. Archer and Mr. Phillips, had already begun to prophesy the speedy downfall of "the poetic drama" for no discernible reason whatsoever except the extensive success of the contemporary instance.

It is idle to assume that the world left its praise of *Paolo and Francesca* because the drama is a hollow, handsome thing, empty of realities. The world left in the same way its praise of *Herod*, also handsome, and not hollow—left it, in its characteristic, ridiculous, sun-worshiping and band-waggoning manner, chiefly from a reaction against too much giving of praise.

Such has been Stephen Phillips' history with the Sun-Worshippers—a phenomenon so striking that it must preface the only consideration of his contribution which concerns readers of poetry. What has the poet tried to do in his contribution? How far has he succeeded?

I

Obviously, one of the things Stephen Phillips tried to do was to create characteristic and expressive lyric forms—whether rhymed or rhymeless. In *But Yet, in Cities of Hell*, in *Thoughts in a Meadow*, in *Midnight, 31st of December*, he has spoken with an expressive, singing tone, his own and underived; in beautiful notes and silences, conceptions more intimate, more individual, than those of his better-known poetic dramas.

Such is the expression and conception of *A Gleam*—lines spoken by a husband to a wife concerning a daughter dead:

I shall know ere the sun arises
By a sudden stirring of thee,
Or blind, slight touch in the dark,
Or face upturned in quivering dream,
That your heart like mine has gone home in the hush to its dead,
Through dew and beginning birds.

Apart from the transcendental thought permeating his work—the thought that behind the visible world is the reality made by the mind—most of these conceptions have the ap-

peal of a very clearer simplicity. This is the appeal of *The Wound*—the speech of a bereaved human father in heaven who is uncomfortable among the happy, hymning souls about him and finds no pain to companion his, not even the suffering of Christ, who had never lost a child.

Brief, and finely unexplanatory, several of these poems concerning human fortunes have a plainness, a quiet air akin to Chaucer's, an English sympathy, very still and brave, very unsobbing and thoughtful before all pain in mortal fates. *The Wife*, by this distinguished touch of Saxon chronicle, tells wonderfully a hard tale,—one note of melodrama would have ruined the story of a woman starving in London with a little hungry boy and an ill husband. In desperation she goes out into the evening to seek money as a street-walker. Returned in the night with the bread her wage has brought, she finds her husband dead.

A striking charm in Stephen Phillips' more personal poetry is his mastery of the peculiar values of the sound of English. In the work of many makers of recent free verse there has been to my ear a somewhat static pose, an air as of rather literal translation into prose of verse originally rhymeless, no doubt, but plentifully melodious and active in the idiom and accent of other tongues. The English poet's admirable use of inter-line rhyme and of assonance, his ability to skip a stone, so-to-speak, along the widening ripples of open vowel-notes up to a poem's horizon-line, his sense of subtle changes in tone, must always be a keen pleasure to those readers for whom reading poetry is the imagination of living sound.

O, why in this breathing field, the meadow of Maytime,
 A-flurry with silverous gusts;
 Why, O my soul must thou still with a sadness behold it;
 Strangely disturbed from far?

* * * * *

If thou were the first that had breathed;
 Then this brooding arch of the blue were beautiful merely,
 Perfect the greenness of grass.
 But, through thine eyes unnumbered dead ones are peering;

* * * * *

And by ghosts is the blowing meadow-land forgotten;
 Memories deepen the blue.

And a child-will sorrow at evening bells over meadows,
And grieve by the breaking sea.
O, never alone can we gaze on the blue and the greenness;
Others are gazing and sigh;
And never alone can we listen to twilight music;
Others listen and weep,
And the woman that sings in the dimness to millions is singing;
Not to thee, O my soul, alone.

This was a Stephen Phillips too little known in America. We heard rather the drums and trappings of the conquests of his poetic dramas. His fame has received another odd twist, in the queer fashions of our land.

Never a writer of programme-music, Stephen Phillips printed his verse without explanation of its form. No explanation was needed. The form explained itself. In late years in America the most conspicuous use of free verse has been the use of the "Imagists," writers highly programmatic and controversial, who have produced a great number of compositions intended to appeal primarily not to the ear but to the eye of the imagination.

In France, in the hands of M. Charles Vildrac, free verse has been developed with a quickened sense and skilled practice of the graphic power of irregular melody and suggestive rhyme, developed with that distinct air of musical accomplishment so feared and so very groundlessly feared by numbers of American Imagists. But in America, always filled with readers extraordinarily "papery" in taste, and tone-deaf to the imagined sound of the words before their eyes, the leading development of free verse has been not at all a wider appreciation of the expressive power of words through their quick and living value as spoken language, not at all the development one would have expected from the countrymen of Poe and Whitman, but a species of omission from poetry of a keen and clear sense of the melodies, the harmonies and tonal values of imagined sound. Thus it has come about that because his work is remembered as musical, it is unconsciously assumed here—by almost everyone except some fair-minded visiting Gael, like Mr. Padraic Colum—that all Stephen Phillips' production is entirely conventional; and it is not and never could be generally admitted in our land that he composed numbers of excellent poems in verse original and free.

II

Of course one reason for this assumption is that the drumming and trampling was all done in iambic pentameter. Like the Imagists, Stephen Phillips has devoted a large portion of his effort to the classic return. Unlike them, he has chosen to return by the familiar road of blank verse. Ulysses, Nero, Nero's Mother, Iole—there is no need to catalogue instances.

In so far as pseudo-classic returns intend to attempt the art of human portraiture by imitating antique casts, it has always seemed to me that they fail, by the very nature of their effort. No one can draw from a cast and from a life-model at the same minute. To tell a new fable with familiar figures realistically treated under classic titles, as Bernard Shaw has done in *Androcles and the Lion*, is one thing. To make a copy of some of the persons—though not the acts—of the Odyssey, as Stephen Phillips did in peopling the action of his *Ulysses*, is another. In fictive power Stephen Phillips' poetic dramas have for me no value, and possess no living creature. A single talkative Newgate prisoner in De Foe's *Moll Flanders*, a single Sea Captain of Sarah Orne Jewett's, embodies a more solid human vitality for me than any figure I have ever encountered in the pages of the English poet's plays or pseudo-classic poems.

As a medium for the expression of ideas, rather than of character, the text of the plays and pseudo-classic poems often evinces a very skilful and beautiful use of the tonal materials of English.

Communicative and haunting are the echoes of a mortal's reasons for his love of a mortal woman, in *Marpessa*:

Because Infinity upon thee broods;
And thou art full of whispers and of shadows.
Thou meanest what the sea has striven to say
So long, and yearned up the cliffs to tell;
Thou art what all the winds have uttered not,
What the still night suggesteth to the heart.

Memorable in *Ulysses* is:

Here would I be, at ease upon this isle
Set in the glassy ocean's azure swoon,
What sward of parsely and of violet,
And poplars shivering in a silvery dream,
And smell of cedar sawn, and sandal-wood,
And these low-crying birds that haunt the deep.

Admirably told is the poet's sense of Herod's anxiety before the news of the rise of the Nazarene prophet:

. . . And all behind him is
A sense of something coming on the world,
A crying of dead prophets from their tombs,
A singing of dead poets from their graves.
I ever dread the young . . .

Manifestly speeches, the last two. Manifestly to be acted. Written by an actor, the poet's plays reveal, as their first aim, their dramatic intent. All else is subordinated to the action. In this endeavor the author, as he has told us, deliberately broke away from the traditional path in which English writers of lyric drama had so long followed Elizabethan guides. He sought a more unified and focussed execution in his productions. Leaving other qualifications quite unconsidered, it would, I suppose, hardly be denied that in this respect—in unified and direct presentation—Stephen Phillips certainly excels his predecessors in poetic drama—Tennyson, Swinburne, and Browning. Lesser as a poet, he was an abler master of the art of writing an acting play. In my own view, it was not the poetry but the drama of the lesser poet's effort which gave the plays their public success.

Perhaps mere honesty should compel here the statement that, from regarding the bestowal of one's interest on poetry as a recreation, I have never fully shared, nor even quite understood, the great, world-wide, medicinal movement for poetry: the concept that the more poetry people can be got to gulp down the better off they will be. Without entering into the question of the validity of this concept, it should be said that undoubtedly a main purpose of Stephen Phillips, second only to his intent of composing acting plays, was this design of using the drama as a means of pouring poetry down the throats of vast audiences. The fact that he did get them to take it in enormous doses for hours, for weeks, for months, has always justly been regarded as a fascinating and extraordinary achievement.

You realize the poet's firmness in the execution of this achievement much less in reading those portions of the plays which present fresh, English ideas, in attractive English verse, attributed to historic, foreign personages, than in the scenes which seem merely a species of rather dull and formal translation. Such is the scene on Olympus in the opening act of *Ulysses* when God after God and Goddess after God-

dess of the Homeric cosmogony comes on with all the old properties, the trident and the rolling thunder and the Olympic mirth and the caduceus and the aegis, and says again the kind of thing the last antique-cast-copier reported and always reports for the Olympian assemblage, until your chief impression is a hope that somebody who has to leave soon will rise and move that we waive the minutes of the last meeting.

This act might have been composed by Bernard Shaw's Britannicus, in *Cæsar and Cleopatra*; and much of the criticism written in the *Poetry Review* by Stephen Phillips seems created from the Britannicus elements of his mind—from formalistic references, and a tendency to construct a platform to speak from in the most unlikely situations.

But he had here, too, moments beyond platforms—moments catholic and relative. It seems only yesterday that we were hearing him quote side by side Heine's sympathetic saying, in his despair, that his only hope was that God would forgive him because it was His business, and Goethe's belief that death cannot be an evil because it is universal.

III

Everyone is thinking very gravely now of the great need of a common and sincere understanding among nations. In the last year and a half, as one singing voice after another has been stilled on the air in France, in Germany, in England, those of us who are especially interested in poetry and the fate of poets consider with an especial thoughtfulness what each of these has told us in his hours here—told us not only by the word of his song, but by the way of his singing.

All must wish the world to keep in its own integrity and variety the individual beauty of each of the little and large languages of the earth. What we need first for an honest Internationalism is an attempt to know the ways of other peoples. This can never be done by translating their songs; still less by making them over in our own image; or even by imitating them: but only by learning to understand them as they were conceived in the speech of their origin.

This is the only sincere Internationalism which poetry can further. To this end, each one who has understood how to use the peculiar genius and faculty of his own tongue has done a service to the world. Such was Stephen Phillips' service.

The mists, the sorrowing echoes of our speech, the cloudy passage of the sailing swan, the shadows of rippled waters, the mysterious reflections of eternity remembered and unascertainable, sang from the motion of his music:

I came at dawn on a river visited never,
Strange, yet unstrange,
For I could follow faithful the wind of that river
Away to sea.
I was driven late in the night to the house of a stranger,
Never that house had I seen;
Though I never slept in it, yet could I tell each room of it,
I knew my way.
At times a lonely face from a crowd looks out at me,
Startling me, wherefore?
That sudden, flitting face I remember dimly,
Dimly familiar.
They played me music at midnight, never yet heard by me;
Unheard, yet heard,
Ah, when?

It is one of the poems of his last printed volume—one of those quieter songs that seem to me to have the singing tone that will carry farthest through mysterious space.

For a poet, it is enough to have truly sung; and one may find fitting for the history of Stephen Phillips the word spoken by a brother poet of another fate:

Light and song and sleep at last,—
Struggling hands and suppliant knees
Get no goodlier gift than these.
Song that holds remembrance fast,
Light than lightens death attend
Round their graves who have to friend
Light, and song, and sleep at last.

EDITH WYATT.